

Summary of Walter Dan Medley interview by Richard Killblane at Pigeon Forge, TN, 6 August 2009
523rd Transportation Company.

Dan Medley was drafted into the Army on 13 January 1966 for two years and assigned to the truck driver school at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

On 21 May 1966, two bus loads of recently graduated truck drivers rode from Fort Jackson to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. There were no officers to command the unit. A staff sergeant from an airborne unit was put in charge until an officer arrived two weeks later. Until then the soldiers performed post details and guard duty.

On 30 May, they received orders assigning them to the 523rd Transportation Company. The company was being activated for Viet Nam. The company had no trucks to train with, but conducted infantry training and escape and evasion training instead.

In July, the drivers boarded three busses to Gary, Indiana where they would pick up 96 5-ton trucks from Kaiser Corp. factory. They also ended up with two 2 ½-ton trucks and drove back to Fort Campbell. They remained over night (RON) at Fort Knox, Kentucky and completed the trip the next day. They did not have time to train on the new trucks but prepared them for rail shipment to California where they would board ships for Viet Nam. Two weeks later on 27 September, the company boarded two aircraft and flew to Oakland, California that night. The one Dan was on had to stop in Omaha, Nebraska for fuel. They were bussed from the airport and boarded the *USS William S. Weigle*, a merchant marine ship that had been taken out of mothballs and converted to a troop ship.

The ship set sail on 28 September. The men sat on deck and played cards to pass the time. Near an island, either Wake or Midway, the ship stopped to offload a passenger with appendicitis. On day 20 of the voyage, the ship stopped at Okinawa for fuel and supplies and the troops were given a 12 hour leave. The ship left Okinawa in early morning and arrived at Cam Ranh Bay on 20 October 1966, Dan's 20th birthday. The *Weigle* then made two other stops before it anchored offshore at Qui Nhon on 23 October.

The 523rd and other companies from the 54th Bn came ashore aboard LARC LXs. Qui Nhon did not have the DeLong Pier yet for ships to berth. The Army buses were waiting for them at Qui Nhon and took them to Camp Addison, where an advance party had erected tents prior to the arrival of the main body. They moved into 16-man GP Mediums. That night they ate C Rations heated in trashcans with immersion heaters.

For training, some of the drivers rode shotgun on trucks with veteran drivers from other units that had been in country for a while. Dan did not. Instead he was assigned to camp improvement. They sent a truck to a river near Qui Nhon to load sandbags to build low blast walls around the tents and bunkers. The company's trucks arrived about five days later.

A PX was established in early 1967. A water purification system was installed in a small river which allowed for clean water and a heater was added for showers. About six months after they arrived, the company moved to other tents near the mess hall. There was a recreation room built with a pool table. A bar was added where you could buy soft drinks and beer for ten cents a can.

Dan remembers seeing a few 10-ton lowboys around the Qui Nhon area.

As soon as their trucks arrived, the 523rd and the other companies of the 54th Bn. began running convoys to An Khe and Plei Ku. About a month later they started hauling to an infantry base at Bong Song, with an air strip made of PSP. The strip went over the crest of a low hill and had an ammo dump, a hospital tent, and a ration yard. It was fifty miles north of Qui Nhon on QL19, and took over half a day to get there and unload. On Dan's first run to Bong Song, he had to remain over night (RON) as his truck was not unloaded in time for the return convoy. That night he was writing a letter to his girlfriend under the dashboard light while mortars started impacting on the other side of the base. During the early runs to Bong Song, the convoys were heavily guarded with gun jeeps and helicopters.

At first the dirt road was smooth, but a few months after their arrival, the entire QL19 had deep potholes. Dan believed the potholes were the result of constant traffic by the daily convoys. The drivers had to constantly tighten the lug nuts on their tires to keep them from coming off. Dan's truck hit a deep pothole while coming down the An Khe Pass that bounced him and he landed on the hinge between the seats, breaking his tailbone. He did not go on sick call, but drove his truck for over a month, while sitting on one hip. The constant bouncing of the trucks would shift the loads. Forklifts would load pallets of cement and push each forward with the next until the truck was full. There was space on both sides of the pallets, and with the constant bouncing the load would shift to one side. The heavy weight on one side would cause the bed bolts to break and the bed to come off. When Dan's load would shift to one side, he would deliberately hit potholes on the other side of the road to bounce the load back to center.

In November 1966, each company was asked to give up about two drivers to go to the GOER unit in Plei Ku. Vernon Hood was one. Because the soldiers of the 523rd. had come over together they would rotate home at the same time. To prevent a complete changeover of company personnel, drivers were transferred to other companies in early 1967 and some in mid-1967. McMillan had been busted in rank because of drinking. He was from an S&P unit in Germany and did not like "Tonka Trucks", what he called 5-ton cargos. He went to an S&P company and loved it. In July the 523rd received replacements from the other companies. Dan saw no noticeable difference in the quality of the transfers to the company and the record breaking cargo loads continued. The 54th Bn received an award for the amount of cargo hauled.

In late 1966 or very early 1967, soldiers of the 523rd. were asked if they wanted to extend. If they had less than 90 days of service when they returned to the United States, they could be discharged and would not have to fill out the rest of their time. This

primarily appealed to draftees who only had to serve two years. Dan extended for 20 days so he could get an early discharge.

In the spring of 1967, they began running to Dak To and Kontum. Dan only made one run to Dak To and one to Kontum. The camp at Dak To was across a floating bridge with a steep hill on the other side. It was rainy and the trucks could not get up enough speed after crossing the bridge to drive up the steep hill under their own power, so tanks had to tow them up the hill. Dan's truck was already being towed by another 5-ton because his truck had a bad radiator. So when their trucks started up the hill, he cranked his engine, which successfully helped push the other truck up the steep muddy hill.

Oasis was another destination west of Plei Ku on the Cambodian border. It was the home of infantry and artillery units. Dan only made a few runs out to the oasis in 1967. In late 1966 and early 1967, they made runs to Song Cau just 20 miles south of Qui Nhon. The convoys would occasionally take sniper fire along some of their convoys.

On one run in the spring, the convoy Dan was riding in came to a stop and waited over 30 minutes, then moved. They slowly came to a bridge and turned down onto the embankment to cross the stream. Dan assumed the bridge had been blown but as he crossed the stream he saw that an M88 tank retriever towing an M60 tank had tried to cross the 30-ton bridge and it had collapsed. The two tracked vehicles formed a "V" with lead and rear tracks still on what was left of the bridge.

Dan once drove through a firefight between the infantry and the enemy just below the Mang Yang Pass.

In early 1967, several truck drivers ran off the road because of lack of sleep and 8th Group put out the policy that drivers had to have 6 hours off the road. That did not mean they had to have six hours of sleep, just six hours of free time to do what they want, drink a beer, relax and get some sleep.

During the summer of 1967, Dan's truck had a little crack in the radiator. He would pull his truck out of the line and stop at the waterfall on An Khe Pass and again at a stream halfway between An Khe and Plei Ku to put water in his radiator. One day he saw a 5-ton in the stream with the front blown away by a land mine. It had done the same thing as he. The enemy evidently was watching the routine and set a mine exactly where his truck pulled out of the convoy to fill the radiator. Dan never did that again. He had his radiator fixed that night.

He went to a friend, Vernon Hood, who was in the GOER Platoon to fix his radiator. They got the solder kit and torch, but had the fire too hot and melted a big hole in the radiator. The motor sergeant came by and asked what they were doing. He lowered the heat and then soldered the hole in the radiator.

On a run to Oasis on 1 September 1967, Dan had two flat tires on the left rear axel and did not carry any spares. He took the tires off and threw them in the back. He then took

one tire of the other side of the same axel and put it on that side. When he returned to Camp Addison late that evening, he had two more flats, so he had to change four that night. He finished around midnight so he did not have the required six hours of free time to go out on the road the next day, since the convoy left at 0400 hours. Someone else took his truck to Plei Ku or Bong Song.

On 2 September, the returning convoy from Plei Ku was ambushed about 5 miles west of An Khe with 7 drivers killed and 17 wounded. Dan heard the VC pulled boards with mines on them across the road stopping the first trucks. He heard VC also ran down and threw satchel charges on the trucks. This accounted for the extensive damage to the cabs of several trucks. One driver's M14 was cut in half by a land mine. He bailed out and the enemy came after him. Someone else shot the VC. Jarmilio was American Indian in the 523rd. Dan first heard he had made it passed the kill zone and hid in the An Khe motorpool. Later he heard that he made it around the damaged trucks and picked up other drivers, taking them out of the kill zone. When he came back in from the ambush that night, he laid down and hid in his bunk for a day.

Dan said that having 4 flats the night before kept him from being in that convoy.

Capt. Paul A. Giese was the 523rd. commander and the convoy commander for that convoy that was ambushed. He called in the 1st. Air Cav. Capt. Giese did not sit around the company area, he was the convoy commander many times. After the ambush the drivers were apprehensive.

Dan had not remembered seeing gun trucks but two or three weeks after the ambush, the 523rd. built a gun truck from a 2 ½-ton truck with sand bags around the inside of the bed with an M60 laying on them. The drivers also put sand bags in the floor of their trucks and some even put a layer of sand bags in front of the windshield.

About a week before DROS, Dan was put on night loading detail, which drove to the yards at Qui Nhon to pick up loads then drop the truck off at the marshalling yard to be ready for the drivers the next morning. The marshalling yard had not been named the "Ponderosa" yet.

Dan Medley logged over 25,000 safe miles before he left Viet Nam and earned the Superior Driving Award. On 17 October 1967, Dan flew on a C130 to Cam Ranh Bay then flew by a chartered DC8 to Tokyo for refueling and to McCord Air Force Base, Washington. There he loaded on a bus that took him to Fort Lewis and started out-processing that evening. They fitted him for a set of dress greens, which had all the correct ribbons and even the Superior Driving Award. He was discharged from the Army the next morning.